

# TEAM LEARNING: **LESSONS FROM MOUNTAIN CLIMBERS**

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I have had the opportunity to work with hundreds of teams engaged in a variety of activities as part of an ongoing research and consultancy project. One of the most interesting studies involved mountain climbing teams. Mountain climbing represents the kind of high stakes, high ambition, and high challenge situations now common in organizations.

Mountain climbing teams provide us with vivid examples to highlight the key points of effective teamwork. Mountain climbers help illustrate that for teams to be effective in the contemporary organization, teams need to do two things: build shared values, and learn.

### Shared Values

Successful teams share two types of values. They value 1) certain aspects of achieving success on the task at hand, and 2) relating to each other as a team.

The shared task values include:

- **Roles** – team members understand the unique contribution and limitations of others and develop a distinct division of labor. One climber might be excellent at deciphering new routes, another at setting ropes, and yet another at leading on the rope.
- **Shared Goals** – the team goal is more important than the individual goal. For example, climbing team members share the desire to reach the mountain summit together as a team, not just as individual climbers.
- **Team confidence** – teams believe they can achieve success.

A second set of shared values relate to interpersonal dynamics.

- **Trust** – team members count on one another to come through as expected. In other words, the team members saw a consistency in behaviors. In mountain climbing, team members rely on each other, resting assured they are safely tethered, even if a partner sets the ropes.
- **Interpersonal understanding** – team members are aware of individual moods, desires, and personal situations so that they would recognize when a fellow team member was too physically weak or mentally exhausted to continue a climb.

These five values prove essential in getting teams off the ground, and lead to success in reaching summits. Yet, it became clear that these shared values were not enough for most teams to be successful in the most challenging of circumstances. Many team members shared values but never learned to overcome common obstacles. It was the combination of shared values and team learning behaviors that lead to top performance.

### Team Learning Actions

The most effective teams draw upon their shared values to build team learning actions. These actions include:

- **Adapting** – responding to problems, set backs, and challenges with creative and timely solutions.

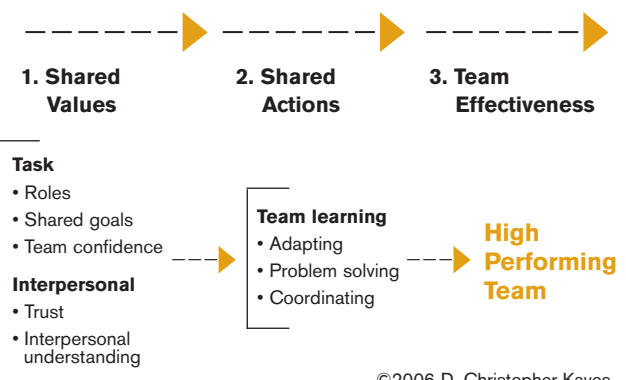
For example, climbers often abandon a climb or make alternative summit plans when they observe an overcrowded mountain or unreliable weather forecasts.

- **Problem solving** – working together and drawing on available resources to reach goals. One team of lost climbers improvised their way back to camp by using the most rudimentary navigation system, the stars, to guide their way back to safety.
- **Coordinating** – coordinating amongst each other, updating other members on progress, and pooling resources at the correct time. Rescue attempts often require the coordinated effort of experienced climbers working together with other experts like helicopter pilots, doctors, and even politicians who authorized rescue resources.

### Learning to be a High Performing Team

As our decade of research revealed, only teams that demonstrate some or all of the above beliefs and behaviors performed at the highest levels. In the end, mountain climbers can teach us important lessons about team work. High performing teams share values and learn to take action in the face of novel situations.

### Team Learning



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